



Posted on Thu, May. 12, 2005

Wrong fertilizer

Don't use settlement money to grow tobacco

Kentucky officials should put an old anti-drug slogan to good use and "just say no" to tobacco growers who are lining up for another go at the public trough.

Yes, we know that North Carolina is spending \$264,800 from the tobacco settlement to study how to expand burley production into the state's flue-cured tobacco-growing regions. That's a nasty trick the Golden Leaf Foundation is playing on the small farms of rugged western North Carolina, which, like their Kentucky counterparts, have depended on burley.

But it doesn't justify straying from the purpose for which almost half of Kentucky's settlement was set aside for agriculture. That was to develop alternatives to tobacco.

Besides, tobacco growers have capital from the federal quota buyout and the state's Phase II bailout to invest in new barns or whatever they need to compete in the new era of no price supports.

After Congress approved the quota buyout last year in exchange for ending the federal tobacco program, the cigarette makers withheld their final Phase II payment to growers -- in accordance, it's beginning to appear, with the deal that Sens. Mitch McConnell and Jim Bunning helped cut.

The Kentucky legislature came to the rescue by diverting \$114 million from agricultural diversification. (This decision will actually cost \$211 million since the state borrowed the money.) So funds that could have gone into boosting other crops or new rural enterprises are going instead to cutting more checks for quota owners and tobacco growers.

Now some tobacco growers are ready to ask the Agricultural Development Board for \$3.4 million to invest in tobacco production.

There's also interest in letting county councils, which will control \$19 million from the settlement this year, fund tobacco projects.

If county councils can't come up with any better ideas than that after five years of dealing with the issue, it would be better to spend the public's money on smoking prevention or health care, where it could do some good.

Remember the cigarette-makers agreed to a \$206 billion legal settlement in 1999 to compensate states for the cost of caring for sick smokers.

We've strongly supported Kentucky's decision to put a big chunk of its settlement into agriculture. Overcoming the economic addiction to tobacco is an essential step in overcoming the physical addiction and medical horrors that tobacco wreaks on Kentucky.

Some tobacco growers, their sense of entitlement inflated by all the mailbox money they've gotten, are under the mistaken impression that the settlement was for them. It never was.

Putting tobacco settlement money into tobacco-growing would be wrong.